

Hideous or hilarious? The fine line between disgust and humour

Justyna Jajszczok

University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland
justyna.jajszczok@us.edu.pl

Abstract

The article compares disgust as defined by the Parasite Avoidance Theory (PAT) and humour explained through the Benign Violation Theory (BVT) in order to analyse whether their affinity could be explained by analogous evolutionary conditioning. Both disgust and humour can be seen as specific, involuntary reactions toward particular triggers, and both may be connected with certain types of violations, particularly violations of body and violations of social norms. Moreover, disgust-sensitivity and humour-sensitivity are assumed to be largely dependent on personal circumstances and thus very difficult to predict before exposure to triggers. According to these theories, the fundamental difference between disgust and humour is that while the success of the latter is predicated on its benignness, the former must necessarily appear malignant enough to elicit the desired effect. The final part of the article is a case study of a “disgusting” joke by British comedian Jimmy Carr, in which various violations recognised by PAT and BVT are analysed.

Keywords: Benign Violation Theory, disgust, humour, Jimmy Carr, Parasite Avoidance Theory.

1. Introduction

The Channel 4 sitcom, *Peep Show*, starring David Mitchell and Robert Webb, ran for nine seasons between the years 2003 and 2015 and won several “best comedy” awards (Anthony 2015), so the view that it is an entertaining show should not be contentious. Neither would be the assertion that some of its scenes – perhaps even the ones considered particularly hilarious – are truly disgusting. In the course of the series, the viewers witness a number of situations that could elicit disgust reactions, from drugging a flatmate suffering from food poisoning to desperate urinating atop minstrel’s gallery, but probably the most memorable moment happens in series 4, episode 5, henceforth known as “the dog eating” episode (Anthony 2015). Accidentally killing the dog of his potential love interest, the character played by Webb first unsuccessfully burns its body and then, to avoid detection, pretends that the charred remains are turkey and actually eats some. The scene in which he bites into the burned leg is one of the most disgusting and simultaneously hysterical moments of the entire series, one which routinely

places high on lists of the best episodes of *Peep Show* (see Bain 2012; Anthony 2015; Jeffrey 2015; Montgomery 2015).

The affinity between disgust and laughter, as exemplified above, is something already recognised and researched by scholars of mixed emotions (Hemenover & Schimmack 2007; Warren & McGraw 2015). However, the examples of disgusting humour used in *Peep Show* and Hemenover & Schimmack (2007) rely on very basic disgust elicitors: watching the act of someone consuming something one would naturally find repulsive, i.e. the remains of a dog and dog faeces, respectively. Nevertheless, anecdotally, when searching for “disgusting jokes,” rather than those based on bodily functions, one is more likely to find distasteful, taboo-breaking jokes (the ones I encountered in my research were misogynistic, racist, or anti-Semitic in nature). The aim of this article is, therefore, to consider the affinity between humour and disgust of a higher order. To this end, this chapter is divided into three parts: the first and the second are devoted to short explanations of theories of disgust and humour and their similarities and differences. The final part is a case study of an offensive joke that may be considered “disgusting,” in which premises of these theories can be investigated.

2. Parasite Avoidance Theory (PAT)

According to Curtis (2018), disgust as an emotion operates on three levels, each one more distant from the biological origin than the other: evolutionary disgust (which she sometimes calls “microbe disgust”), social disgust (also called manners disgust), and moral disgust. These levels may be analogous with what she refers to as three brains of a growing level of complexity: the ancient reptile brain responsible for instincts and habits (repeated automated behaviours); the mammalian brain responsible for desires, motivation and rewards; and the neocortex responsible for thinking, planning and making decisions. Curtis argues that disgust can be explained by the Parasite Avoidance Theory (PAT), which postulates that what we find disgusting (and thus what we avoid) belongs to the group of factors (triggers) which may potentially threaten our health or life: faeces, snot and lice are all associated with the risk of infection, so, Curtis (2018) argues, our automatic reaction to them is biologically-conditioned disgust. This point has been explored earlier in relation to food rejection mechanisms (Rozin et al. 2008) and three functional domains of disgust involving avoiding parasites, choosing sexual partners, and interacting socially (Tybur et al. 2009).

This argument distinguishes PAT from theories postulated by psychologists and cultural critics of repulsion such as Douglas (1966) or Kristeva (1982), who associate disgust with cultural conditioning, in that, unlike them, Curtis (2013: 24-40) believes that disgust not only predates culture but also predates humans; she notes that animals, too, display behaviours that may be interpreted as showing disgust. In other words, within the premises of PAT, animals – and not just mammals but also simpler organisms – express and act on disgust in the evolutionary reflex of avoiding infection – such as, for example, rats gagging, retching, and shaking their heads when given distasteful foods (Curtis 2013: 39).

While this relates to the first level (or layer) of disgust, the other two, i.e., manners disgust and moral disgust, are necessarily filtered through culture and are more closely associated with human interactions than animal behaviour (which does not mean that manners in the sense of socially-conditioned behaviour manifesting in respecting or challenging herd hierarchy does not play a certain part in societies of higher animals). Manners disgust (Curtis 2013: 60-75) could be described as biological disgust with the added layer of the social contract of behaviour: not doing things which in a social context would be considered disgusting, even if their association with pathogens might be quite tangential: picking one’s nose and flicking the balled gunk into the distance, biting one’s nails, scratching one’s head so vigorously that a cloud of dandruff

expels from it, etc. Thus, Curtis asserts, a person who does such things is labelled unmannerly and disgusting and, as a consequence, tends to be avoided unless they serve a socially important function which would trump the disgust reaction (Curtis 2013: 65-76). By way of example, we can agree that, while body odour may be an unacceptable quality in a life partner with whom one constantly shares intimate space, it is possible to constrain one's disgust at the same affliction in, say, a plumber, whose presence in our space is short-lived and their skills much more important than their personal hygiene. This points to the crucial assumption of PAT: as so many other culturally-coded behaviours prove, social interactions are in a perpetual mode of trade-off and compromise, which allows us to proceed relatively smoothly with our everyday life.

Moral disgust, on the other hand, could be explained as a more refined cultural disgust on top of (already refined) manners disgust on top of microbes disgust: the one furthest removed from its evolutionary origins and the one most related to culture and hence with the highest possibility of variation across different cultures. Moral disgust, Curtis (2013: 91) maintains, is reserved for "social parasites," i.e. those who cheat the system for their own gain, leaving the rest at a disadvantage. As she hypothesises, "perhaps there's another connection with the PAT of disgust here, too. Moral disgust extends to parasites on the social system." Social parasitism is one of the two components of "extra disgusting" moral failings, the other being "acts of violence involving bodily fluids." Thus, generally speaking, what is particularly morally disgusting according to PAT is the violation of body and of social order.

In their study of disgust triggers, Curtis & de Barra (2018) listed a number of disgust-evoking scenarios. Examples such as "You see a nurse dressing an infected wound; under the yellow bandages there is a weeping sore" would be categorised as belonging to microbe disgust; "Seeing a man scratch his crotch on the train" would belong to manners disgust, and "You discover that your romantic partner once paid for sexual intercourse" would be associated with moral disgust. The list of elicitors contains 72 scenarios of disgust-triggering situations, all of which Curtis devised herself and which could broadly be classified as belonging to the Western culture standards. What seems particularly interesting is that those elicitors which could be considered amusing or weirdly funny are those that would be classified as belonging to either manners or moral disgust, but not microbe disgust; here are some of the examples taken from Curtis & de Barra's (2018) study:

"You see a child using a toilet brush to clean the dishes."

"Seeing a chef using an apparently clean dust-pan to serve vegetables in a restaurant."

"Eating onion flavoured ice-cream."

"A friend admits to attempting sexual intercourse with a piece of fruit."

(Curtis & de Barra 2018: 4-5)

It is my hypothesis that the similarity of humour and disgust tends to operate more frequently on the level of higher disgust: manners and morals. This might explain why a search for "most disgusting jokes" does not generally return biologically disgusting jokes, such that offend senses of smell or taste, like the disgusting humour used by creators of *Peep Show* – but such which offend good taste and propriety and which break taboos. This is not particularly surprising: as Stwora (2020: 115) shows, there is an overlap between categories of human taboos and disgust elicitors.

3. Benign Violation Theory (BVT)

According to McGraw & Warren's (2014: 75) Benign Violation Theory (BVT), a humorous response happens when a person performs two appraisals of a given situation simultaneously:

the appraisal of the violation (e.g. of breaking a taboo) and the appraisal of whether this violation is benign or not. If it is, then humour occurs. When it comes to violations, they note that

[a]s humans evolved to develop a sense of self, culture, language, and a system of logic, violations likely expanded to include threats to identity (e.g. insults), social norms (e.g. flatulence), cultural norms (e.g. awkward greetings), linguistic norms (e.g. puns, malapropisms), logic norms (e.g. absurdities), and moral norms (e.g. disrespectful behaviour). In sum, violations include anything that seems threatening or departs from a norm in a potentially negative way.

(McGraw & Warren 2014: 75)

If seen through the above definition of violations, disgust could also be approached as the reaction to anything threatening or departing from norms in a potentially negative way. Perhaps the explanation of the affinity between humour and disgust lies in the fact that both assume the violation of norms, but while humour is associated with harmlessness, disgust entails a real threat to physical health, social order and even morality. Whereas cleaning plates with a toilet brush constitutes an actual risk to health and could be considered a malignant (i.e. not benign) violation, attempting intercourse with a foodstuff (either Curtis's "piece of fruit" or baked goods of the *American Pie* variety), while violating a social taboo, appears harmless and thus produces humour. McGraw & Warren's BVT accounts for various violations they mention: puns and wordplay (violation of linguistic norm), sarcasm (violation of conversational norm), punchline (violation of logic or correctness), tickling (violation of body), and slapstick (violation of safety) (McGraw & Warren 2014: 76), but it can also explain scatological humour and – pertinent to this article – controversial humour.

There is, however, an avenue of interest that is very briefly mentioned by Curtis (2018), related to disgust as a basic emotion/need, and that is the fact that, when confronted with survival instincts, specifically hunger and lust, the level of disgust tends to be lowered. In the situation of starvation, it is possible to consume products that would be too disgusting to even touch in times of abundance. Similarly, as disgust is strongly associated with potential sources of disease, its sensitivity must be lowered for people to engage in sexual behaviour. The mechanism which is involved in this disgust reduction is sexual arousal which "is a motivational state that moves humans toward situations that inherently pose a risk of disease transmission" (Fleischman et al. 2015). This explains why some people engage in behaviour that might be considered disgusting within accepted social norms (various less common sexual kinks come to mind here) and why other people are too disgusted to engage in any potentially risky behaviour, even that accepted by the social contract (such as holding hands). Extremes on both sides appear to be both socially and evolutionally disadvantageous.

This leads to the conclusion offered by McGraw & Warren (2014: 76): "Both what seems wrong and what seems OK depend on people's physiological vulnerabilities, desired identity traits, values, cultural background, language, and understanding of logic." What we find amusing, just like what we find disgusting, depends largely on personal circumstances (be they shaped by internal or external factors). This also may be, as Oring (2016: 60) postulates, due to the fact that BVT is an "emotional theory of humor" as opposed to incongruity theories, which are based on cognitive dissonance. This distinction is of particular use here because, unlike Oring's appropriate incongruity, BVT reveals its affinity with emotions, disgust in particular, in the way it perceives the violations of social and cultural norms: "what are considered benign violations vary with the individual" (Oring 2016: 60).

4. Case study

When discussing the violation of linguistic norms in a joke and the relation to its success and the level of harmlessness, McGraw & Warren (2014: 76) assert that “[j]okes that are not benign don’t make sense or seem stupid or offensive,” which suggests that offensiveness precludes humour. This we empirically and anecdotally know not to be the case – at least, not every time and not in all circumstances.

This section is devoted to the analysis of a specific joke made by a British comedian Jimmy Carr. The reason why only one joke is used here as a case study for the benign and malign violations stems mainly from the fact that jokes marked as disgusting or offensive according to Oring’s “subjective moral order” (2016: 60) tend to be repetitive and use the same taboo-breaking mechanisms: most of them employ racist, paedophilic, misogynist undertones in a repetitive, unimaginative way. An illustration of this can be found on Reddit in the discussion entitled “What’s the most disgusting or offensive joke you know?” on subreddit r/funny (2010). Carr’s joke used in the following discussion, while certainly in bad taste, uses ingenuity and makes certain intellectual demands from its audience. It is sophisticated rather than crude offensiveness.

Jimmy Carr is often referred to as one of the most offensive comedians of the contemporary UK comedy scene and perhaps the most successful one of the last two decades (see Barker 2016). Brian Logan, *The Guardian*’s comedy reviewer, sums him up thus: “blue humour, playground abuse, jokes about rape and paedophilia, and (according to taste) just enough wit and joke-writing flair to keep the stench and squalor at bay” (Logan 2019). Because of his off-colour material and carefully curated reputation of an uber-offensive anti-PC crusader, Carr quite often elicits a disgust response from the general public. For instance, in June 2019, he angered K-pop fans with his “absolutely disgusting” joke about the Korean boyband BTS (Powell 2019),¹ and in July, he received more backlash from Little People UK for remarking that “dwarves are abortions which made it” (Griffin 2019). Although he regularly arouses controversy, he has become a household name, having hosted and guest-starred in a variety of comedy panel shows, and so his position on the British comedy scene seems unshakeable.

Carr tells the following joke on an episode of *Green Room with Paul Provenza*, a chat show during which invited comedians discuss their craft. He delivers this quip as a response to the host’s question of what the most offensive joke² he has ever written is: “If only Africa had more mosquito nets, then every year we could save millions of mosquitoes dying needlessly of AIDS” (Provenza 2011). Undoubtedly, the joke violates a number of norms: it ascribes bigger worth to the lives of mosquitoes – well-known disease carriers and pests – than those of people in Africa, and thus it dehumanises Africans; employing the widespread stereotype, it conflates all inhabitants of the continent into one monolithic group and, even more offensively, assumes that all of them suffer from AIDS; it reverses and thus mocks the expectations of the Public Service Announcement about the significance of mosquito nets, and it parodies the slogan of charitable organisations working in Africa, in a way undermining their project.

In accordance with McGraw & Warren’s observation and Carr’s own assertion, the above joke is offensive and could also be considered “disgusting.” If we accept the BVT, then this joke, by its level of hostility (and the number of norms it violates), should not produce humour. However, the joke is quite successful when told to the audience; while it does elicit sounds

¹ Carr told this joke on the Australian television show *20 to One*, when he commented on the scale of BTS’s popularity: “When I heard something Korean had exploded in America, I got worried. So I guess it could have been worse. But not much worse” (Powell 2019). Compared to his other remarks, this joke seems rather benign.

² According to Carr (in Carr & Greeves 2006, ch. 5), “A joke on paper is a pale and inadequate one-dimensional reproduction of itself,” so instead of reading it here, I recommend viewing it. It is available online from <https://youtu.be/TcBRePwOPPI?t=68>, accessed February 22, 2021.

associated with breaking of social norms, the overall reaction is laughter – involuntary but also uncomfortable, as if people were ashamed of having laughed at it. Carr himself accounts for this kind of reaction:

There is a very special noise that the comedy club audience makes when they hear a joke that hits their taboo right in the middle. It's a short bark of involuntary laughter that immediately turns into an 'ooh' of disapproval. What's interesting is the order those two reactions come in. The laugh is always first. The joke has made them lose control of their social self-edit function, just for a moment.
(Carr & Greeves 2006, ch. 8)

Thus, instead of defying BVT, Carr's observations qualify it, adding crucial specifications that allow for a better understanding of the joke and its apparent success.

First of all, while being offensive, it does seem benign because the offence it might carry with it is rather taken than given: it is the audience's rather than the comedian's responsibility to go through the list of norm violations and decide if this particular joke is acceptable or if it crosses the line. And, as has been stated before, in relation to humour as well as disgust, these decisions are made individually and on a case-by-case basis. Secondly, if any offence is given, it is addressed to a group outside of the audience and thus creates the sense of communal glee among friends laughing at strangers, which in itself is a strong bonding experience. And thirdly, "One of the most important functions of a joke is to shock. It's an acceptable way of giving vent to the unacceptable" (Carr & Greeves 2006, ch. 8). This joke may overall appear benign within the premises of BVT because it creates a subversive laugh over something that is no laughing matter and simultaneously breaks the tension, emphasising the audience's guilty conscience.

Finally, Carr notes:

Far from being fearless mavericks, riding roughshod across popular sensibilities in pursuit of a laugh, most stand-up comics, and most "offensive" jokes, are not taboo-busting at all: they are inherently conservative. By mocking situations that we would otherwise find uncomfortable, by legitimising our anxieties about people who are different and hard to relate to, these jokes perpetuate the status quo. They don't make things worse for the people they mock, but nor do they help us to understand them. That's not their job: they are jokes. It isn't the function or purpose of jokes to enlighten. Their only use is to amuse.

(Carr & Greeves 2006, ch. 8)

Similarly to the social functions of manners disgust and moral disgust, offensive jokes create a target and apply means of social punishment to it without the actual use of force. It would seem, therefore, that this approach would always benefit social bonds and exclude undesirable individuals from the laughing circle: shaming and mocking are powerful tools of social control. While well-rounded, Carr's conclusion becomes problematic when we consider the kind of status quo offensive jokes perpetuate. Speaking from the position of privilege, Carr and, by extension, his audience, perceives these violations are benign and, therefore, humorous. It would be interesting to examine if the people who happen to be the butts of such "disgusting" jokes would attest to their benignness as well.

5. Conclusion

By comparing disgust, as explained by PAT and humour within the definition offered by BVT, I attempted to hypothesise if their affinity could be explained by similar evolutionary mechanisms. As shown above, both humour and disgust can be viewed as automated responses to external stimuli, very much outside of the conscious thought process. Only after they are retro-actively filtered through cultural conditioning do they assume their social functions of

either correcting undesirable behaviours or revealing their bonding properties. Both humour and disgust are related to violations of certain norms, but the most crucial difference between these two is that while the prerequisite of humour is that these violations are benign, the effectiveness of disgust as a disease-avoiding mechanism is predicated on its malignancy.

Considering all of the above, it needs to be appreciated that these observations and claims do not relate to individual cases but to people as a whole, in both disgust and humour extremes of emotion. Like humour, the disgust response is inspired by a number of culture-specific factors, and its appearance changes depending on time and place (Rozin et al. 2008: 771). Consequently, one's disgust or humour triggers may stray significantly from the average. Theories proposed by Curtis (2018), Rozin et al. (2008), and Tybur et al. (2009), on the one hand, and Oring (2016) and McGraw & Warren (2014) on the other, explain general reactions and thus remain vague to a certain extent: evolutionary, psychological and cultural theories can only go so far before the general is confronted with the personal.

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